When Ledelle moe

MASS MoCA





Ledelle Moe: When

Susan Cross

Ledelle Moe's weathered, monolithic heads and figures suggest relics of an ancient civilization, or monuments torn down during political upheaval. Like the colossal basalt heads of the Olmecs or the toppled marble likenesses of Lenin or Saddam Hussein, the works bear the patina of time and exude the aura of history. What appears to be timeworn stone on closer examination reveals itself to be concrete; and the massive forms are, in fact, comprised of smaller sections joined with steel seams. Indeed, despite their immense size, these figures seem fragile, vulnerable - like beloved objects broken and glued back together, treasured for the memories they hold. Monuments can inspire similar nostalgia, functioning as both vessels and producers of collective memories and belief systems. Yet Moe's hollow, imperfect figures fallen, recumbent, disembodied, marked, and scarred with the traces of their making and aging - subvert the usual characteristics of traditional monuments and memorials. At the same time, they prompt questions about whom we choose to honor and remember and how.

Moe has spent two decades thinking about these questions. She began her series Memorial (Collapse) in 2005 as a tribute to anonymous victims of violent conflict. Moved by the death of a young man massacred in Liberia, along with similar incidents briefly reported in newspapers and online, Moe began giving solid form to the fleeting lives of these strangers as a way to acknowledge the weight and gravity of their deaths and the events that caused them. The news photographs became the artist's models for the large heads - all male - which lay on their sides and appear as if they are sleeping. Moe found the placid expressions a marked contrast to the brutality of the subjects' deaths. The series' three most recent heads from 2019 reference the spate of xenophobic attacks on immigrants who have moved to Moe's home country of South Africa looking for work. The portraits are based on images from the news, as well as people from the artist's daily life, and function as elegies for these individuals while simultaneously acknowledging a long history of nameless victims of violence - millions over millennia whose stories usually go untold, unremembered.



Above, below: *Congregation*, 2006. Concrete and steel, variable dimensions Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. and Darlene Pérez

The vulnerability of these heads – despite their size - differs dramatically from the strength articulated in more conventional monuments. which tend to honor the victors rather than victims. Fittingly, Moe has replaced the usual verticality of public statuary, with their elevated pedestals, with horizontally oriented sculptures that sit directly on the ground. Similarly, Moe's enormous work Relief - an awkward animal is an image of struggle, or perhaps, as the title suggests, the relief that comes with submission. Straining on its back, with chest distended and legs splayed, the writhing creature suggests both a dog and a horse, animals which appear frequently in the artist's drawings, often morphing into their human companions. The creature can easily be imagined as a fallen mount, its rider missing. Moe seems to have literally and metaphorically upended the ubiquitous equestrian statue that honors triumphant warriors in countless town squares and plazas across Europe and America. The defenseless animal reminds us of the casualties - and the dynamics of dominance that shore up this narrative of masculine heroism that we so often see immortalized in solid bronze. These themes, which have preoccupied

Moe throughout her career, mirror recent global conversations about the role of civic statuary in perpetuating white supremacy and normalizing systems of inequality. Recent protests in her hometown called for the removal of a monument to Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, which sparked an international movement. The former prime minister and British imperialist (for whom Rhodesia now Zimbabwe - was named), has come to represent not only South Africa's colonial past, and the subsequent era of apartheid, but continuing obstacles to equality and social justice. Similarly, the past several years have witnessed the removal of Confederate statues from public sites in the U.S. (many of which were only erected in the 1910s) as well as passionate protests about their continued public display, both for and against.



In contrast to the historical struggles suggested by Moe's flailing animal, the horizontal figures of her Transitions/Displacements (2012) series look serene and peaceful. Reminiscent of effigies removed from sarcophagi (traditionally reserved for individuals of a certain status), these figures recline, naked, with their arms at their sides. In this attitude, they resemble bodies lovingly prepared for burial. In fact, the artist made these works following the deaths of her mother and grandmother in close succession. Yet, the carvings are not likenesses; instead the subjects have been transformed into anonymous archetypes. Moe likens them to Mother Earth – metaphorically the very ground beneath our feet, our home. The female body has long been conflated with landscape, and the exaggerated horizontality of the elongated figures of Transitions/Displacements suggests a softly undulating horizon line, the curves of the bodies taking on the appearance of rolling hills and valleys. From a distance, the silhouettes of the three figures recall an interconnected mountain range – the gulfs between them visible only from a closer vantage point.

The smallest of the three is oriented in the opposite direction — perhaps a reference to the artist herself being left behind as her loved ones depart. She is partially shrouded in small bird-like forms that create a shawl around her shoulders and face. Funerary objects in many cultures picture birds, which are often believed to transport the soul to the afterlife. For Moe, the avian imagery has multiple associations and influences, such as the ancient Tibetan ritual of feeding corpses to vultures (an ecological way of burial) which connects the dead to nature's cycles of life and death. The throng of birds also alludes to the uncanny power of groups, from the murmuration of starlings to shoals of fish that can mysteriously move together like a single organism.

In nearly all of her works Moe explores the complex relationship between the individual and the collective, between mass and matter both in the material and spiritual sense. Not far away, a new 18-foot high kneeling female figure towers above the rest of the sculptures. She is partially surrounded by clusters of small organic forms, not unlike the abstracted bird shapes of Transitions/Displacements. Here, they variously suggest amoebas, mussels, jellyfish, and petals. Though these forms appear to float, a roughly welded grid of thin metal rods supports them. This geometric lattice allows only partial access to the immense, hauntingly familiar figure. The image of a kneeling woman is seen across world cultures, from the Aztecs in Mesoamerica to the Yoruba in West Africa and to the Christian church, where the Virgin Mary is often pictured in this pose. Indeed, the delicate, metal grille that flanks Moe's abstracted figure was influenced by a Methodist Church in Cape Town, and the gate-like structure brings to mind a rood screen, a partially open tracery which separates the nave of a church from the chancel. This sacred space contains the altar and crucifix ("rood" meaning cross in old English). While Mary usually plays a secondary role at the altar, at times flanking the cross, Moe has put her female heroine front and center, foregrounding

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this symbol of love, grief, and resilience. While the sculpture's gesture conjures that of prayer or devotion, Moe also sees the pose as "an act of waiting...a moment before or after action." The title of this piece, *Remain*, reminds us of remains of the dead and also of the people who remain, those who are left behind, as well as the life that continues on, generation after generation. The cell-like organisms swarming around the figure articulate this generative cycle.

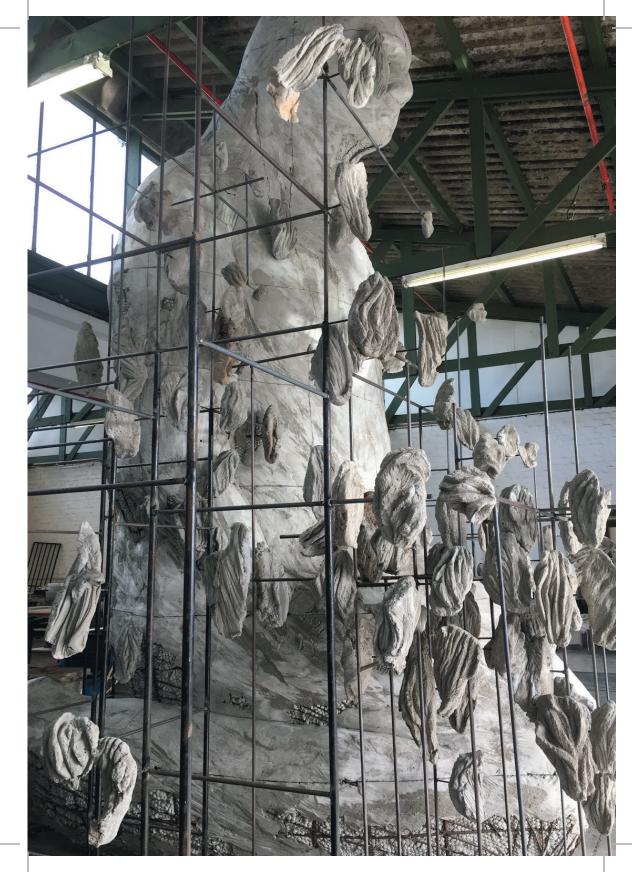
On the back wall of the gallery, an expansive relief titled Congregation (2006) mirrors the accumulation of small forms circling Remain and similarly celebrates the connections between us. The expansive relief is composed of hundreds of small heads, each the size of a fist. This accretion of faces represents people Moe has encountered on her travels around the world and those lodged in her imagination. Reminiscent of the flocks and swarms she has referenced elsewhere, the amorphous mass of heads resembles a map without borders, suggesting the migration of both animals and people, including her own family, her father's mother having made her way to South Africa from the Shetland Isles via Egypt during the war. Adding to the collection of heads over time, Moe mixes soil from the location where she is working into the concrete, making links between distant peoples and places. Moe's incorporation of soil into her works acknowledges the significance of particular sites and the

histories embedded there, while connecting us to the land that we share. Perhaps too, it is a reminder that we are all of — and will return to — the earth. Death haunts the entire exhibition, and fittingly the title functions as a reminder of an inevitability, that we will at some point face death, despite our efforts to deny it. It is not a matter of if, but when.

With the works in her Erosion series (2009), Moe references classical funerary sculptures and Victorian-era cemetery monuments. The stiff, angel-like figures clothed in flowing, pleated gowns appear to have been knocked over from a once-upright position. They have the air of ruins, their title a reference to the decay of both built structures and memory. They are a reminder that the monuments we create to the dead might also have a limited life. The only clothed sculptures in the exhibition, these figures reflect that values and mores of a particular moment in the past no longer embraced. Their erosion is a reminder of such change and also a reminder that work is required in remembering our history, passing it on for the next generation to steward or to re-assess.

Moe's choice of concrete as a medium is as symbolic as it is practical. Mostly made of sand, rock, and water, it can deteriorate over time, returning to its original form. Unlike the bronze used in many monuments, which can last for millennia, concrete (as Moe uses it — as a thin skin) evokes the mutability of life — as well as that of history. Like the memorials that help us process our grief and its ever-changing form, monuments might be best understood as vehicles through which we can process history and its changing narratives, rather than a way to entomb it. Both burdens are a continuing necessity.

> Right: Remain in progress in the artist's studio, 2019. Concrete and steel, approx. 18 x 18 x 22 feet



Ledelle Moe (b.1971, Durban, South Africa) graduated from Natal Technikon in 1993. She was one of the founding members of the FLAT Gallery, an alternative space in Durban. A travel grant in 1994 took her to the United States where she attended the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

She completed her Master's Degree in 1996 before becoming an adjunct professor in the Sculpture Department at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore. She has also taught at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., Virginia Commonwealth University, and St. Mary's College of Maryland. Moe has exhibited in a number of international venues including the Peréz Art Museum, Miami; Semaphore Gallery, Neuchâtel, Switzerland; Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.; Smack Mellon, Brooklyn; the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens, New York; and Kulturhuset, Stockholm, among others.

Moe's work is permanently installed at the North Carolina Museum of Art's Museum Park in Raleigh. In 2002 she was the recipient of a Joan Mitchell Award and in 2008 received the Kreeger Museum Artist Award. Moe is head of sculpture at Stellenbosch University. She currently lives and works in Cape Town.

Ledelle Moe When Curated by Susan Cross December 14, 2019–September 7, 2020

Cover: *Memorial (Collapse) V*, 2005 Concrete and steel, approx. 10 x 11 x 12 feet

All work courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted

This exhibition is made possible through leadership support from Xtina and James R. Parks.

Additional support has been received from the Henry Moore Foundation. Programming at MASS MoCA is made possible in part by the Barr Foundation, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, and Mass Cultural Council.



Untitled, 1996/2019. Drypoint etching on paper, 13 ½ x 10 inches

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